

## **The Hidden Seeds of Survival:**

### **Adorno and the Life of Art**

Are artworks alive? It is necessary to specify, first of all, what is meant by this question. One answer to it might wish to point out, cheerfully, that works of art are still being produced, and that older works are still being exhibited, performed, archived, and anthologised, and hence still have an audience, a public, a readership. Art is alive insofar as it is still around and, moreover, insofar as it has a function in the world in which people conduct their lives. It is as if people communicate life to artworks as they brush up against them. Something like this would be the answer to my opening question proffered by the cultural functionary, employed to affirm that art is not only alive, but well. That, however, is not an answer to the question meant here. Rather, to ask 'are artworks alive?' is to ask: are artworks living beings? do they have a life of their own – a life, moreover, that may be their own in the emphatic sense that it is not merely an 'as if' version of the life of human beings? This way of putting the question invites, perhaps, some puzzlement, and certainly a less ready response – less ready in part because what 'alive' might mean here is not immediately obvious, since it is now not simply a more vivid term for 'current' or 'relevant' or 'plentiful' or 'unabating', but less ready also because artworks are not conspicuously alive in the way that human beings seem to be. They do not breathe or digest or have any of the other signs by which the presence of life is routinely determined. And yet, these deficiencies notwithstanding, may we nevertheless think that artworks are alive? One way to address this version of the question might be to have recourse to analogy, specifically to the analogy of artworks with organic forms, whereby they can be said to be alive because of

their structural similarity with organisms. Compelling as this way of thinking has proved in aesthetics and literary theory since Romanticism, it is surely qualified by the caveat that works of art are not, on such an account, really living in themselves, but rather what is being affirmed is that their genesis is substantially comparable to that of things that are really living.

I want in this essay to pursue a line of thinking that departs from both of these ways of answering my opening question. I want, that is, to trace the suggestion that art has life, but not as we know it, in the thinking of Theodor Adorno. Adorno's frequent recourse to the suggestion that artworks are living is predicated neither on the kind of cultural optimism that points to a thriving art-scene (no surprise there), nor on the mere analogy of artworks to things more routinely acknowledged as living. This second point is especially significant. That artworks might be said to share certain characteristics with beings that are accepted as having life – paradigmatically, perhaps, the human beings that create and behold artworks, but also natural objects – cannot serve as the ground, for Adorno, for speaking of artworks as alive. Crucially, it is in fact no longer clear, according to Adorno, that human beings are unquestionably alive. This is a leitmotif of Adorno's thinking – one that is frequently prompted in his work, incidentally, in connection with works of art<sup>1</sup> – and it has specific consequences for the kind of existence that they themselves may be thought to have. Crucially, the dissimilarity of artworks to human life, or, rather, to what passes for human life, is the condition of their own animacy. Putting it this way round – rather than saying that the life of artworks is not human – is essential to the case that Adorno wants to make. However, I also argue that by denying the predication of art life on human life Adorno does not simply sever any connection between art and

humanity. On the contrary, art's non-human life intimates what I might tentatively call a true anthropomorphism.

In what follows, I first address the relation between 'living experience' and the life of the artwork in *Aesthetic Theory*, since the account of this relation Adorno develops there implicitly concerns the suspicion that the life of art is just the result of anthropomorphic projection. Having established that the life of art cannot confidently be ascribed to the beholder of the artwork, I examine Adorno's claim that artworks have a 'life sui generis' (*AT*, 4) not predicated upon the life of their makers. It is here that the insistence that the life of art is not human life begins fully to emerge. Finally, I show that Adorno's conception of the life of artworks is substantially modelled on the idea of resurrection: on the idea, that is, of a life that is at once a radical transformation and recovery of a life that has gone before.

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At the beginning of the section of *Aesthetic Theory* explicitly concerned with the formulation of a theory of the artwork, Adorno addresses the question of aesthetic experience and its relation to the object in terms, specifically, of animacy and its potential sources. In doing so, he continues the critique of the enlightenment assumption that animacy is mere anthropomorphic projection that he and Horkheimer formulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. He also addresses a question latent in any attempt to argue for the life of artworks: just because the experience of artworks is felt to be animating, why should that entail that artworks themselves are alive? Adorno gives the following answer:

That the experience of artworks is adequate only as living experience is more than a statement about the relation of the observer to the observed, more than a statement about psychological cathexis as a condition of

aesthetic perception. Aesthetic experience is living only by way of the object, in that instant in which artworks themselves become living under its gaze. [...] Through contemplative immersion the immanent processual quality of the work is set free. By speaking, it becomes something that moves in itself. (AT, 175-76)<sup>2</sup>

The possibility suggested here that there is a kind of experience that is not living is of course central to the whole of Adorno's philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Adorno does not view the life of art as a straightforwardly anthropomorphic projection because he does not *prima facie* accept that human beings as they are, are alive. Though this supposition has long been recognised as crucial to Adorno's thinking, it is nevertheless worth briefly elaborating its contrarian thrust here, since one is perhaps tempted in reading the epigraph 'Life does not live' at the opening of *Minima Moralia*, for instance, to contend that, like it or not, human beings when they are alive, are alive. Adorno insists that 'life' is a more ambiguous, and in fact more deeply riven category, than might be suggested by the assumption that it is determinable by taking a pulse. Life means more than life.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (a work to which we will have cause to return below) is described by Adorno as 'an appeal at law filed by life against life', a description that seeks to evoke Proust's attempt to resist accepted wisdom and to recover instead experience as it occurred.<sup>5</sup> The process of coming to an acceptance of universally acknowledged wisdom – the accumulation of experience, the gradual, unnoticed attenuation of unrealistic ideals, the recognition that there is nothing more to 'life' than its own course – might be one definition of 'life'; the recovery of a quite different kind of experience, of unexpected innervation, might be another.

All the more emphatic than the above description of Proust's novel, however, is Adorno's critique in *Negative Dialectics* of the philosophical fetishization of life itself in its apparently most basic instantiations:

The less of life remains, the greater the temptation for our consciousness to take the sparse and abrupt living remnants for the phenomenal absolute.

Even so, nothing could be experienced as truly alive if something that transcends life were not promised also; no straining of the concept leads beyond that.<sup>6</sup>

Turning on its head the consoling apothegm that where there's life, there's hope, Adorno insists that only where there is hope, is there life. This statement of the necessity to life of something beyond what it currently is, and concomitantly of the falsity of clinging to the putative remnants of life once all promise has been eliminated from it, emerges from Adorno's claim that implicit to Alban Berg's music is the question, 'Can this be all?' Music, in fact, seems particularly to express this sense that life is irreducible to sheer immediacy. Quite how radically Adorno intends his contention that life without promise cannot be 'experienced as truly alive' is suggested in his book on Mahler, where he refers to the affirmation of the possible as 'the promise without which breath could not for a second be drawn.'<sup>7</sup> Mahler is, for Adorno, the artist par excellence of this realisation. Acknowledging that Mahler could hardly 'escape the concept of "Life"' given its prominence in the vitalistic enthusiasm of his time, Adorno nevertheless distinguishes Mahler's violation of accepted standards of technical mastery with Strauss's expertise in terms of their different relation to 'life'. Strauss's music is characterised by 'the affirmative echo of vitalism', whereas Mahler 'resembles the metaphysical philosophies that reflected the idea of life, Bergson and the late Simmel.' In particular, Adorno goes on, 'Simmel's formula of life as more than life does not sit ill on Mahler.' (*Mahler*, 133)<sup>8</sup> This does not

mean that Mahler's music is merely an expression of a philosophical position – it would be ludicrous to try to determine whether Bergson and Simmel were in some way the sources of Mahler's music and hence its privileged *explicans*. Rather, it is the strictly musical characteristic of Mahler's work, his tendency to be drawn by the direction latent in his music, as opposed to the exercise of Straussian mastery, that autonomously echoes Simmel's conception of life being irreducible to sheer vitality. The life of Mahler's music is not in gratification, not in the exercise of vital force, but in its restless development beyond itself.

We will return to Mahler – and to Mahlerian duration in particular – below. But for now it should be emphasised that for Adorno life is such that it is not reducible to itself. There is no basic life. Or put another way, life reduced to its bases is not life in its purest, unadulterated form, but rather a shadow of what it might fully be. This is a 'life' that is called 'life' precisely because any sense of what 'life' might be capable of becoming has been lost. The assertion that there is no breathing without promise is thus, for Adorno, no exaggeration, and indeed it combines with the fact that in *Negative Dialectics* the question of the point of life is put into the mouth of 'a desperate man who wants to kill himself' (*ND*, 376). No distinction between literal and metaphorical, bare and biographical life is finally operative here. The withdrawal of the promise of possibility tends to the extinction of life, not its recognition as phenomenologically absolute.

This detour into Adorno's critique of human life as it is and its assumed meaningfulness is necessary because it is implied in that critique that humans are disqualified from bestowing life on other things, including works of art. A being whose own life is open to question – a questioning that already reveals life's opposition to itself, since '[a] life that had any point would not need to

inquire about it' (ND, 377) – cannot ascribe life to anything else. Hence, the systematic connection, as it were, between Adorno's scepticism concerning human life and his abiding sense that artworks are living inheres in the fact that our derangement concerning life entails that things whose putative life is in no way comparable to ours might turn out to intimate the kind of life that we ought to have. Furthermore, the passage concerning the relation of living experience and the life of the artwork from *Aesthetic Theory* above short-circuits the transferral of animacy from observer to artwork – or, for that matter, vice versa. The object is responsible for rendering aesthetic experience living. But at the same time the object itself becomes animate only under the gaze of aesthetic experience.<sup>9</sup> Much experience of artworks is procedural, reliant upon the academically sanctioned and 'fully backed-up' processing of an object according to historical, philological, and other schema.<sup>10</sup> In such a case, the observer's mastery of the object is just as fatal to the life of her or his experience of it as it is to the object under scrutiny. Freedom from officially sanctioned critical procedure is freedom for both the object and the observer, even if the latter's freedom is paradoxically won via submission to former. The object is alive because under such conditions aesthetic experience arises thanks to the object's activity – an activity prompted by the observer's immersion within it. That moment, for example, at which a remembered line of verse becomes luminous – perhaps in unexpected or even inconvenient circumstances – is the moment at which aesthetic experience becomes living, but it is living thanks to the uncontrolled activity of the line itself in memory. According to Adorno, art thus participates in enlightenment's mortification of the world and in its dialectic. The artwork both confirms enlightenment's thesis about anthropomorphism – the

life of the artwork is contingent upon our engagement with it – and at the same time discounts that thesis – even what human beings make comes to have a life of its own that we cannot fully account for. Encounter with artworks is not one in which the artwork is invested with properties otherwise wholly absent from it, or submitted to the techniques of academically sanctioned critical strictures, but rather one characterised by an animated passivity on the part of the beholder in relation to what becomes animate in its very recognition as such.<sup>11</sup>

Adorno is thus acutely aware of the need to address the suspicion that the animacy of art is the result of mere psychological cathexis. This is a delicate task, since he also wishes to give due prominence to the role of experience, not just in aesthetics in general, but in the constitution of the work of art itself in particular. His most important attempt to deal with the questions that arise from this attempt is in his essay ‘Valéry Proust Museum’, where he pits two of the most important thinkers not just for the understanding of artworks, but for the understanding of artworks as *in some sense* living, against one another. Though commentary on this essay has not usually emphasised this aspect of the controversy Adorno establishes between them, what it is for an artwork to live is, as we will see, the central disagreement between Marcel Proust and Paul Valéry.<sup>12</sup> The essay, however, begins with death:

The German word, ‘museal’, has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present.<sup>13</sup>

It is Valéry who is in sympathy with this sense that museums are the mortuaries of dead culture. The lost connection between the works housed in them and ‘the immediacy of life’ is, for Valéry, fatal to art (*VPM*, 180). For Proust, on the



contrary, it is only in the context of the museum that an artwork, severed from its functional context, comes into its 'true spontaneity', which is registered in its profound effect on the individual observer (*VPM*, 181). What Valéry and Proust advance are two different views of the life of art – if not, in fact, of life itself. The realisation to which Valéry comes is that the curation of artworks in museums effectively amputates them, separating them from the organism upon which they depend for survival. They are reified and neutralized. Life for Valéry is usefulness, effectiveness, function – a conclusion at which he arrives not by way of the belief that art should a priori be engaged or committed, but through the discovery that 'the only pure works, the only works that can sustain serious observation, are the impure ones which do not exhaust themselves in that observation but point beyond, towards a social context.' (*VPM*, 180) Life for Proust, on the contrary, is innervation, stimulation of the observer's consciousness. As such, Proust is concerned not with the life that art once had in a functional context – a life-world, we might say – from which it has been excised, but with its second life, its afterlife – a life that is not a continuation of its former life, but a departure from it.<sup>14</sup>

As readers of Adorno might expect, the dispute between Valéry and Proust is not adjudicated by coming down on one side or the other, but by noting that a particular conception of art emerges between the two writers – where 'between' is not some beige mean, but the point at which both theories pass over into each other. It is at this point, that is, that we can begin to see the importance to Adorno of refusing to model art life on human life. What Adorno praises in Valéry, in opposition to Proust, is his insistence that art is not ultimately referable to the observing subject. 'Few things have contributed so greatly to

dehumanization as has the universal human belief that products of the mind are justified only in so far as they exist for men' (*VPM*, 182). We will return to the way that Valéry's anti-humanism holds out the promise of a true humanism. But it must first be noted that Proust is not simply blamed for his ultimate reference of artworks to the pleasure of human observers, rather than to their role within a human functional context:

Works of art can fully embody the *promesse du bonheur* only when they have been uprooted from their native soil and have set out along the path to their own destruction. Proust recognized this. The procedure which today relegates every work of art to the museum, even Picasso's most recent sculpture, is irreversible. It is not solely reprehensible, however, for it presages a situation in which art, having completed its estrangement from human ends, returns, in Novalis' words, to life. (*VPM*, 185)

Commenting on the famous opening scene of *La Côte de chez Swann*, in which the narrator recalls slipping into sleep as a child and thereby seemingly becoming whatever the topic of his bedtime reading was, Adorno remarks that '[t]his is the reconciliation of that split which Valéry so irreconcilably laments. The chaos of cultural goods fades into the bliss of the child whose body feels itself at one with the nimbus of distance.' (*VPM*, 185)

The point I want to draw from this, however, is less that Proust's and Valéry's positions 'pass[ ] over into one another' (*VPM*, 183), and more that Adorno's avowal of the life of artworks is predicated upon a fundamental uncertainty about human beings – the uncertainty as to whether it is really they who are alive any more. Scepticism concerning the human as a privileged source of life is, of course, a key motif in Adorno's thinking. Against such a background, seeking solace in non-human objects can no longer be dismissed as a reifying denial of the vivid pulse of human life in all its gaiety and wealth. In an affecting essay on the mentor of his youth, Siegfried Kracauer, Adorno notes an absence in

Kracauer's thought that might otherwise have drawn censure as a serious intellectual omission:

One looks in vain in the storehouse of Kracauer's intellectual motifs [*Motivschatz*] for indignation about reification. To a consciousness that suspects it has been abandoned by human beings, objects are superior. In them thought makes reparation for what human beings have done to the living. The state of innocence would be the condition of needy objects, shabby, despised objects alienated from their purposes.<sup>15</sup>

It is not simply that Kracauer's consciousness neglects to mount a critique of reification; on the contrary, it was itself a venue for the collection and custody of objects – it was, that is, a 'storehouse'. This storehouse is in some ways a lonely one, but it is nevertheless supplied with the alluring objects that human society has discarded and disdained, like yesteryear's unfashionable knick-knacks.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the hint of childhood recollection in this passage is striking. The fear of abandonment is counterbalanced, first of all, by the somewhat furtive delight at being let loose in a storehouse, in which objects, precisely because of their desuetude, are innocent and thus capable of expiating the guilt of what has been done to those that have made them. Their innocence is their ignorance of the purpose meant for them by their progenitors and employers.

The Proustian tenor of Adorno's essay on Kracauer – the experience of solace in objects, the atmosphere of childhood recollection – perhaps unsurprisingly, in view of my earlier discussion of 'Valéry Proust Museum', finds its complement in Adorno's extended appreciation of Valéry's philosophy of art, especially as intimated in the collections translated as *Windstriche* and *Über Kunst*.<sup>17</sup> As if it were an intensification of Kracauer's disappointed turn from the human, Adorno declares that 'Valéry's humanism denounces the vulgar demand that art be human' (*NL*, I, 162). Valéry's humanism – which rejects the insistence

that the human *as it is* should constitute the measure of all things – is a true humanism. There is, that is to say, a specific conception of humanity at work here, one that is not referable to really existing humanity. Adorno reiterates this point in *Aesthetic Theory*: art's 'humanity is incompatible with any ideology of service to human beings. It is loyal to human beings only through inhumanity toward them.' (AT, 197)<sup>18</sup> Crucially, it is Valéry's denunciation of the insistence that art be human that is central to the conception of the life of art that can be drawn from his thinking. 'Works of art,' Adorno remarks, again glossing Valéry, 'acquire life only when they renounce their likeness to the human'. (NL, I, 163)

It is at an important early juncture in *Aesthetic Theory* that Adorno attempts to specify quite what it is that makes the life of art distinct from human life, as well as, for that matter, from the life of natural objects:

Although the demarcation line between art and the empirical must not be effaced, and least of all by the glorification of the artist, artworks nevertheless have life *sui generis*. This life is not just their external fate. Significant artworks constantly divulge [*kehren ... hervor*] new layers, age, grow cold, die. It is a tautology that, as artifacts, human productions [*Hervorbringungen*], they do not live immediately as humans do. But the emphasis on the artifactual element in art concerns less the fact that it is manufactured than its own inner constitution, regardless of how it came to be. Artworks are alive in that they speak in a fashion that is denied to natural objects and the subjects who make them. (AT, 4-5)<sup>19</sup>

As we have seen, the putative immediacy of human life is no guarantee that it is in fact all the more truly life for that. What Adorno specifically calls 'immediate life' is, in fact, held to be tantamount to its opposite: '[w]here it is entirely present, entirely itself, it reveals itself as given up to death.' (Mahler, 156) The passage from *Aesthetic Theory* above repeats Valéry's injunction against humanism in art, but it also develops Adorno's interpretation to the effect that that injunction fosters a true humanism. In order to bring out the way in which

the similarity and difference between artworks and human beings is held in tension in this passage, we may turn briefly, not to Valéry, but to Proust. At one point in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, Proust's narrator is led into an 'uninhabited' drawing-room (where he is to wait to be received for tea with Mme Swann and Gilberte) by a footman who does not, so far as the reader is told, say anything. In that room, the narrator was 'left in the company of orchids, roses and violets which, like people who stand waiting beside you but do not know you, did not break the silence [*gardaient un silence*], which their individuality as live things [*leur individualité de choses vivantes*] only made the more striking'.<sup>20</sup> While this example may seem starkly to contrast with Adorno's emphasis in the above quotation on the difference of artworks from natural objects – natural objects such as orchids, roses, and violets, perhaps – and from people – people who stand beside us but with whom we are not acquainted, for example – it in fact helps to bring into view a number of important aspects of Adorno's argument. First, the plants are not 'live things' primarily or, indeed, at all by dint of their natural biological functions. Rather, constitutive of their life for Proust's narrator is their implied ability to speak, to break the silence that, since in fact they do not speak, becomes all the more noticeable. For the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*, flowers are by no means natural objects in sheer opposition to artworks, and, to repeat, their life is characterised not by mute photosynthesis, respiration, pollination, and so on, but by the fact that they bear meaning (which they may withhold from us) in themselves. What is clear from the above passage in *Aesthetic Theory* is that, like the flowers in Mme Swann's drawing-room, artworks have the capacity to speak, and it is this capacity that constitutes their life. But, it may here be objected, Proust's plants do not speak (though it is felt

that they could), whereas Adorno's artworks do (though what they say, we are not told). Furthermore, the orchids, etc., are explicitly compared to people, which would seem to run counter to Adorno's insistence that the life of artworks resides in their ability to speak in a way that is closed to human subjects. But the people in the passage from Proust are people that we do not know, who are closed to us, prevented by social convention from making themselves knowable, and are thus reduced to membership in the amorphous mass of strangers. The flowers are thus both modelled on people in a society which erects barriers between them despite their physical proximity, inhibiting understanding and even affection, but at the same time they are nevertheless people that bear the possibility of an as yet undiscovered human encounter. Comparably, for Adorno, what artworks say is not directly comprehensible – '[a]rtworks,' we are later informed, 'speak like elves in fairy tales' (*AT*, 126) – and concomitantly the life that they have as speaking things is not one that we yet share.<sup>21</sup> The artwork's ability to speak and its life are intimately connected.<sup>22</sup> Artworks, as Adorno remarks just after the passage quoted above, 'speak by virtue of the communication of everything particular [*alles Einzelnen*] in them', in such a way that their speaking is strictly irreducible to what they say.

It is in the speech of artworks that their fundamental connection with natural beauty inheres. The relation between art objects and natural objects in the above passage from *Aesthetic Theory* is, however, explicitly disavowed. This disavowal is nevertheless not the final word on this relation, any more than Adorno holds that the denial of the power of speech to humans and natural objects is final. First, to be sure, in claiming that artworks divulge new layers and that they thereby age, Adorno is recollecting a moment in Hegel's aesthetics in

which Hegel both contrasts natural objects with artworks, and emphasises the status of art as a kind of product distinct from nature:

For the products of all the arts are works of the spirit and therefore are not, like natural productions, complete all at once within their specific sphere; on the contrary, they have a beginning, a progress, a perfection, and an end, a growth, blossoming, and decay.<sup>23</sup>

The contrast is striking because the characteristics of growth, blossoming, and decay seem in fact to be typical of natural products and thence metaphorically transposed to artworks. Hegel, however, rejects that transposition. What he is implicitly claiming here is that growth, blossoming, and decay of artwork constitutes what they are as what they are (so to speak), whereas natural growth, etc., is in a fundamental sense accidental to natural productions, which have an external relationship to their coming- and ceasing-to-be.

In the passage in which he claims that artworks ‘age, grow cold, die’, Adorno is thus seeking to establish a distinction, inspired by Hegel’s, between the life course, so to speak, of art and that of natural objects. Adorno, however, hardly takes over Hegel’s relegation of natural beauty in general; on the contrary, that relegation is perhaps the chief object of criticism in the section on ‘Natural Beauty’ in *Aesthetic Theory*. Hegel’s deafness to ‘the speech of what is not significative’ (AT, 75) is fatal not only to his appreciation of natural beauty, but moreover to any understanding of the relation between art and nature. In speaking, artworks are not merely exercising a capacity that natural objects simply do not have, but rather ‘art wants once again to attain what has become opaque to humans in the language of nature’ (AT, 77) – a language to which we are now deaf because on the Baconian rack, nature just tells us what we think we want to hear. Artworks do not, therefore, imitate particular instances of nature –

the miscarriage of most attempts to do that is testament to this claim – but rather what has been rendered mute in nature as such. In a passage that begins with an important formulation for this essay's focus on the relation of artworks to the human, Adorno illustrates this point with the example of Anton von Webern's music:

With human means art wants to realize the language of what is not human. The pure expression of artworks, freed from every thing-like interference, even from everything so-called natural, converges with nature just as in Webern's most authentic works the pure tone, to which they are reduced by the strength of subjective sensibility, reverses dialectically into natural sound: that of an eloquent nature, certainly, its language, not the portrayal of a part of nature. (AT, 78)

The distance of Webern's works from musical attempts to capture birdsong or waterfalls emphasises the point that it is natural sound, and not particular natural sounds, that are heard in his music. What is moreover striking in the above passage is that it is art that deploys 'human means' to realise its ends, rather than those means being employed by the artist as such. Hence also in Webern's music 'the strength of subjective sensibility' becomes nature. As we saw earlier, the artwork's artifactuality means that it cannot be said to live as human beings do. It is central to Adorno's aesthetics in general that the artifactuality of artworks as a mere marker of their human provenance is insignificant, and it belongs rather to the artwork's own constitution. This is not at all to claim that artifactuality itself is insignificant, but entails, on the contrary, the centrality of that feature of the artwork to the emergence of its own particular life. That the artwork takes over its own artifactuality is thus a token of the life it has in excess of human production of, or investment in, it.



It is worth briefly recapping certain aspects of the argument I have been making. Artworks are alive, for Adorno, and not by mere analogy with human persons. Instead, Adorno advocates Valéry's refusal of the requirement for art to be human and, furthermore, views this refusal as the condition of art's life. We have also begun to see what art's life is: crucially, the life of art is mortal.

This insistence on art's mortality of course runs counter to versions of the life of art that construe it as duration, where duration means a kind of cultural immortality modelled on bourgeois conceptions of established property. According to Adorno, art's primitive connection with the attempt to render the transient durable is itself 'accompanied by consciousness of its futility, perhaps even that such duration [...] was tied up with a sense of guilt toward the living.' (AT, 280) Fixation on durability thus mistakes the sources of art's life: 'Confusion occurs between what a detestable nationalist exhortation once called the "permanent value of artworks"—everything dead, formal, and neutralized in them—and the hidden seeds of survival.' (AT, 28)<sup>24</sup> In this context, it is an acute irony that those for whom permanent value is the measure of all things, art included, cannot tolerate long works of art. Conjuring the image of the frequent-flier businessman, Adorno remarks that 'those who have survived Mahler by fifty years flinch at his works as the habitués of air travel shrink from a voyage by sea.' But what they are flinching from is really their own accelerated mortality:

Mahlerian duration reminds them that they have themselves lost duration; perhaps they fear that they no longer live at all. They fend this off with the important man's superior assertion that he has no time, which lets slip its own ignominious truth. (*Mahler*, 73)

The permanent birthday party for imperishable cultural goods is proof against ever having to endure an artwork itself. The demand of Mahlerian duration, and

of other works from which expurgation would be fatal, that the work itself be encountered is in opposition to the impulse desires from artworks simply that they persist.

But if the life of art is not chiefly characterised by duration as such, then is it merely fleeting? Commenting on Adorno's contention that the essay as form 'tries to render the transient eternal', J.M. Bernstein claims that '[t]he oxymoron of rendering the transient eternal is figurative; the transient [...] can have all the weight, all the substantiality, all the objectivity and bindingness that was once believed to be the prerogative of the necessary and universal.'<sup>25</sup> Even if it downplays the indeed oxymoronic intention of Adorno's statement by viewing it figuratively, this reading nevertheless rightly emphasises the importance to Adorno of a radical re-evaluation of the ephemeral. In the context of his aesthetics in particular, Adorno emphasises that the recuperation of the ephemeral is not mere extension, but transformation and recovery in one. The distinction Adorno draws between immortal duration and resurrection is especially important here. 'Only something that has been mortal,' he states, 'can be resurrected.' (*NL*, II, 28) And resurrection is, it would seem, the only possible source of the life that Adorno envisages for art, since duration, by contrast, must immobilise (read: kill) what it perpetuates. Adorno makes this clear in the closing stages of one of his essays on Goethe, both of which, incidentally, address the meaning of classicizing conceptions of durability and the alternatives to them that emerge in Goethe's work. Commenting on the final scene of *Faust*, Adorno remarks that '[t]he power of life, as a power of continued life, is equated with forgetting. It is only in being forgotten and thereby transformed that anything survives at all. [...] Hope is not memory held fast but the return of what has been

forgotten.' (NL, I, 120) Thus Goethe anticipates the Proustian search for *temps perdu*: 'The idea of immortality is tolerated only in what is itself, as Proust well knew, transient – in works of art as the last metaphors for revelation in the authentic language.' (NL, I, 184) Significantly, the remarks on Goethe and on Proust come at the conclusions of their respective commentaries. These termini are, of course, the points at which Adorno gives up his own contact with the work – both his own on which he is engaged and the work of the writers he is in the process of discussing – relinquishing his grasp on it, at least for now. It is at precisely such moments in the course of commentary that the immortality of the transient is liable to be realized. A kind of life that drastically transcends humans as they are, and yet is offered to them as the fulfilment of their humanity; requiring the radical transformation of the corrupt body, yet not eschewing the bodily altogether: resurrection is, in fact, a remarkably apt way to think about the life of art. The refusal to be amenable to humanity on the part of art is the intimation of a humanity that might yet come to be, by means of a refusal to conform to humanity as it is. In its renunciation of the human, therefore, art figures forth what is confected, rejected, and believed impossible by enlightenment disavowals of myth, a true anthropomorphism.

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<sup>1</sup> The epigraph to Part I of *Minima Moralia*, 'Life does not live', is taken, according to Adorno, from the nineteenth-century Austrian novelist, Ferdinand Kürnberger. See *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2000), 19 (hereafter *MM*). Since Adorno frequently expresses in *MM* fatigue with

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America, the likeliest source for this epigraph is Kürnberger's *Der Amerika-Müde: Amerikanisches Kulturbild* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Meidinger, 1855), though I have not managed to find that precise formulation there. Cf. Adorno's supposition that it was, however, with cubism that art first recognised that 'life does not live'. *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1999), 301 (hereafter *AT*).

<sup>2</sup> Translation modified with reference to Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann et al, 20 vols in 23 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1970-1986), VII (1972), 262 (hereafter *GS* and cited by volume- and page-number).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 40-74 and *passim*, and Alastair Morgan, *Adorno's Concept of Life* (London: Continuum, 2007), 24-38.

<sup>4</sup> A brief moment of meta-commentary is necessary here. In the sentence preceding the one to which this note is appended I refer to 'life', where I wish to make clear that the meaning of that term is in doubt, and am only content to do without the scare-quotes where I venture the claim that 'life means more than life', in which the meaning of that term cannot but be in doubt. I do not pretend that the usage of scare-quoted 'life' throughout this essay is systematically consistent. On the practice of placing 'life' in quotation-marks in recent 'limit biologies' and in his own discussion of them see Stefan Helmreich, 'What Was Life? Answers from Three Limit Biologies', *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 671-96 (693). Helmreich could not claim that his own usage in this regard is entirely consistent, nor, I imagine, would he want to.

<sup>5</sup> 'Short Commentaries on Proust' (1958), *Notes to Literature*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholse, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), I, 174-84 (176). Hereafter *NL*.

<sup>6</sup> *Negative Dialectics* (1966), trans. by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2000), 375 (hereafter *ND*).

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<sup>7</sup> *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (1960; second edition, 1963), trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 37 (hereafter *Mahler*).

<sup>8</sup> Adorno explicitly mentions Strauss's *Salome* (1905) and hence the implicit comparison may be between that work and Mahler's 6th (1906) and perhaps 7th (1908) symphonies (*Mahler*, 132). More broadly, however, since the relation to specific philosophical authorships is relevant to the comparison, the Nietzschean vitalism of Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896) is surely in the background here. Cf. Adorno's criticism of Strauss in this case with his earlier one of Stravinsky in *Philosophy of New Music* (1949), trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 122-23.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl has also recently emphasized the importance of this point in Adorno's aesthetics. See *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 40.

<sup>10</sup> *MM*, 70 and, for commentary, see Ross Wilson, 'Dialectical Aesthetics and the Kantian *Rettung*: On Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*', *New German Critique*, 104 (2008): 55-69.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bernstein's remarks on the importance of passivity to moral insight (*Adorno*, 24-30). Bernstein speaks of 'significant passivity, a passivity of consciousness that is not, eventually, debilitating' (29) and goes on to claim that '[t]he depth, pervasiveness, ineliminability, and constitutive role in rationality of dependence on sensuous particulars is, it might be said, Adorno's central thought.' (31)

<sup>12</sup> See Catherine Lui, 'Art Escapes Criticism, or Adorno's Museum', *Cultural Critique*, 60 (2005): 217-44, for a reading of this essay in the context of, amongst other things, a broader discussion of the role of the museum in modern society.

<sup>13</sup> 'Valéry Proust Museum', in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 175-85 (175). Hereafter *VPM*.

<sup>14</sup> On the motif of the 'second life' in Adorno's thinking in general, and as inspired by his reading of Proust in particular, see Alexander García Düttmann, 'A Second Life: Notes on

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Adorno's Reading of Proust', *World Picture*, 3 (2009),

[http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_3/Duttman.html](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_3/Duttman.html).

<sup>15</sup> 'The Curious Realist: Siegfried Kracauer' (1964), in *NL*, II, 58-75 (75). Adorno, to whom the volume was dedicated, is likely thinking of Kracauer's collection, *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), in general. Adorno sets out some of the reasons why Kracauer might have felt abandoned by human beings at the beginning of 'The Curious Realist' (59-60). Cf. with the assessment of the lacuna in Kracauer's thinking Adorno's statement about Walter Benjamin that 'one will search his writings in vain for a concept like autonomy; yet others, such as totality, life, system, from the sphere of subjective metaphysics, are equally absent'. 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', in *Prisms*, 227-42 (236). As in the case of Kracauer, the relegation in Benjamin's thinking of certain cardinal concepts or key motifs is no mere deficiency, but in fact a distinctive and essential aspect of its power.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. aphorism 145, 'Art-object [*Kunstfigur*]', in *MM*: 'Accumulated domestic monstrosities can shock the unwary by their relation to works of art. Even the hemispherical paper-weight with a fir-tree landscape submerged under glass and below it a greeting from Bad Wildungen has some resemblance to Stifter's green Fichtau, even the polychrome garden gnome to a little wight from Balzac or Dickens.' (225) The translator of *Minima Moralia* tells us that Fichtau is the 'idyllic valley' that appears in Stifter's tales; Volker Zimmerman, the current mayor of Bad Wildungen, describes it as 'a major health resort and inspiring "feel good town" with a lot of captivating charms'. <http://bad.wildungen.info/> (accessed 6 October 2015). What art works and 'monstrosities' of this kind share is their abiding attachment to imitation, joyfully proclaimed and hence despised in the case of kitsch, denied but secretly essential in the case of artworks.

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<sup>17</sup> *Windstriche: Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen*, trans. Bernhard Böschenstein, Hans Staub, and Peter Szondi ([Wiesbaden]: Insel, 1959) and *Über Kunst: Essays*, trans. Carlo Schmid (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1959).

<sup>18</sup> Translation modified with reference to *GS*, VII, 293. In the above, 'humanity' translates 'Humanität' and 'human beings' (which are plural here) 'Menschen'. The more readily signalled distinction in German between humanity ('Humanität') and human beings ('Menschen') has been a rich resource for philosophers wishing to argue that the latter do not always fully possess, or have not yet entirely attained, the former. For a detailed account of Adorno's inheritance of this aspect of Valéry's aesthetics, see Peter V. Zima, 'Inhuman Aesthetics: From Poe, Mallarmé and Valéry to Adorno and Lyotard', in *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, ed. by Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005) 253-64. Zima does not, however, draw the connection between the rejection of anthropomorphism (in both Valéry and Adorno) and the life of art that I am seeking to establish.

<sup>19</sup> Translation modified with reference to *GS*, VII, 14-15. I confess I haven't been able to English Adorno's play on *hervor kehren*, to turn up, to divulge, and *Hervorbringung*, a bringing-forth, a product. That play is nevertheless important because it mirrors in Adorno's prose the way the artwork takes over its artifactuality and incorporates it, so to speak, in its own constitution. More on this below. And cf. here 'The Aging of the New Music', trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 181-202, which provides a symptomatology of the aging of New Music.

<sup>20</sup> See *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. by James Grieve (London: Penguin, 2003), 102.

<sup>21</sup> For an insightful reading of Adorno's understanding of how artworks speak, and the interpretation of that speaking undertaken by philosophy, see Christoph Menke, *Die Kraft der Kunst* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 2013), 129-30.

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<sup>22</sup> An intimacy of connection perhaps more clearly evident in the German than in the (nonetheless valiant) translation of this difficult phrase: '*Lebendig sind sie als sprechende*' (*GS*, VII, 14): 'they are alive as speaking [things]' or 'they are living insofar as they are speaking' might be possible alternatives or glosses to Hullot-Kentor's translation quoted above.

<sup>23</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T.M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), II, 614.

<sup>24</sup> Translation modified with reference to *GS*, VII, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Bernstein, *Adorno*, 234.